Collaborating in the digital era

White Paper - A Guide for Action

Guidance for policymakers and practitioners on how to manage, lead and assess collaborations in the digital era, relevant for a wide range of collaborative practices:

- collaborations made up by public actors, or by both public and external actors
- collaborations for designing public policies or for delivering public services
- collaborations at local, regional, or national levels
### Collaborating for Good governance

**1: How to lead collaboration?**

- **Recommendations**
  - **Leading**
    - Build a shared vision and manage the "relational capital"
    - Find a balance between flexibility and innovation, and focus on the desired outcome and project goals.
    - Adopt a leadership style that works for the context and stage of collaboration

**2: How to collaborate for public service innovation?**

- **Recommendations**
  - **Collaborating for innovation**
    - Ensure the needed diversity of actors
    - Build a shared understanding
    - Explore new ideas and knowledge
    - Actively seek and secure internal and external support

**3: How to involve citizens?**

- **Recommendations**
  - **Involving citizens**
    - Encourage open and transparent two-way communication between government and citizens
    - Formalise the participatory process to ensure transparency
    - Ensure the necessary support for the purpose, promotion, and sustainability of the platform
    - Engage disengaged societal groups
    - Use the engagement process not only to inform or consult citizens, target collaboration and empowerment

**4: How to assess collaboration?**

- **Recommendations**
  - **Assessing**
    - Be aware of the trade-off between accountability and legitimacy
    - Balance the need for standardisation with the complex situation that you are assessing
    - Improve data sharing between partners
    - Take feedback seriously
    - Identify how to define and measure efficiency
    - Improve understanding on the differential impact of collaboration on efficiency

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Governments today face a complex and changing environment of societal, economical, and technological challenges. At the same time, citizens ask for stronger legitimacy and accountability as well as for more efficiency and effectiveness in both policy design and service delivery.

Transformation towards greater collaboration across organisations, within government, and with non-government actors, is essential for good governance and for innovative and inclusive policies and services. Collaboration, both internal and with external partners, companies and society, also facilitates engagement and improves citizen participation.

A central question is: How can governments transform into being more open, innovative, and collaborative?

We have studied collaborations within governments, and between public and private partners in ten countries with different administrative traditions across Europe, with a special emphasis on the challenges of governance in the digital era. We conducted numerous in-depth case studies, larger surveys, and other assessments across these different collaborations.

"A central question is: How can governments transform into being more open, innovative, and collaborative?"

The ‘holy grail’ of collaboration in the digital era

Collaboration is seen as crucial for dealing with increasing complex, transboundary, cross-cutting, or “wicked” policy problems, such as the COVID-19 pandemic – as it enhances government’s ability to tackle various and sometimes also contradictory policy goals. At the same time, the digital transformation is said to facilitate collaboration, and thus also openness, and innovation in the public sector. The transformation towards greater collaboration, moving from government for the people towards government by the people is thus linked with technological advances.

Collaboration is challenging, especially when multiple stakeholders are involved, or if the collaboration process, composition, or related management and leadership issues are not carefully considered. The ‘holy grail’ of collaboration in and by governments is therefore a never-ending quest for practitioners, and a core theme for public administration and public management research. Collaboration in the digital era brings novel challenges but also opportunities. It depends on multiple factors, such as the type, scope and intensity of the collaboration, the political, societal, and economic context within which it takes place, and the type of issue it addresses.

Our research shows that there is a lot of variety and fuzziness in the use of the concept “collaborative governance” in the scholarly literature and in policy documents. Engaging in collaborations is expected, but often difficult in practice. Committed collaboration might mean moving beyond one’s own organisation’s goals or interests, and involves political, legal, technical, and cultural hurdles.

Collaboration also varies with its specific societal, political, and administrative context. Collaborations vary in scope and intensity. Some are permanent, others are more temporary. Some are formal, others are rather informal. Some are mandatory, others voluntary. Furthermore, collaboration is not value-free. Instead, it can be also quite political – addressing not only governments’ capacity, efficiency, and effectiveness, but also their legitimacy, trust, and power. Well-performing collaborations are successful because they combine capacity and legitimacy.

This White Paper addresses four main challenges for collaboration in the digital era and provides recommendations for action.

Leading collaborations: What skills do the managerial leaders of a collaboration that has multiple public and private partners, in the context of digitalisation, need? What considerations should be made in collaborations where partners have different backgrounds, experiences, and interests? What leadership structures and styles works best?
Such collaborations are often less institutionalised and may require a distinct approach in terms of leadership structure and style.

Collaborating for public service innovation: How to ensure that collaborations are open and innovative? How can partners be engaged, and how can trust between them be strengthened for the collaboration to function in an open way?

Engaging citizens in policy design: How can citizens be engaged and empowered in policy design, via e-platforms? How can collaborative platforms be designed to improve the extent and quality of citizen participation?

Assessing collaborations: How can collaborations make policy design and service delivery more innovative and efficient, and do they reduce red tape? How can we ensure that collaborations, both within government and between governments and external partners, remain accountable to the public, and thus maintain legitimacy?

Where can I find out more?

Visit our website: tropico-project.eu

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Explore the research behind the results:
TROPICO looked at the institutional conditions shaping collaborative government, including formal rules and norms for collaboration, and the emergence of innovative collaboration practices in policy design and service delivery across Europe. The researchers conducted a review of over 700 publications, including both academic literature and reports on collaborative governance. Our research also investigated what drives the willingness to collaborate, with a series of survey experiments to identify managers and politicians’ preferences.

Learn more in our articles on the fuzzy concept of collaborative governance, on how public managers value non-price objectives in public procurement, and on innovative policy design in Germany. Read our research report on the concept of collaborative governance, including a list of institutional factors that are seen to facilitate or obstruct collaboration.

Check our collection of Codes of Collaboration:
The collection offers an overview of rules and regulations for collaboration in 10 European countries.
The TROPICO project

Our objective

TROPICO investigated how public administrations are transformed into open, innovative, and collaborative governments. With a better understanding of this transformation, collaboration in policy design and service delivery can be enhanced, advancing the participation of public, private, and societal actors.

Our research

TROPICO analysed collaboration in and by governments, with a special emphasis on the use of ICT, and its consequences from a comparative perspective. We examined ten countries, representing different administrative traditions. We have developed resources through extensive document studies, expert surveys and case studies including in-depth interviews with public officials and managers in specific collaborations.
How to lead collaboration?

1:

**Collaborative leadership**
- **Catalyst**
- **Convener**
- **Mediator**

**Exploration Learning**
- Introducing new actors and knowledge
  - supporting differences of opinions
  - exploring problems and opportunities
  - supporting learning
  - supporting “out-of-the-box” thinking
  - creating an atmosphere in which failure is forgiven

**Motivation**
- Bringing actors together
  - motivating
  - empowering
  - creating interactive arenas

**Trust Relations**
- Strengthening interpersonal relations
  - building trust
  - facilitating dialogue
  - resolving conflicts

**Transactional leadership**
- **Performance**
- **Ensuring progress**
  - monitoring success
  - pushing for more time and energy
  - rewarding or sanctioning the behaviour of employees
  - focusing on the tasks and the objectives
1: How to lead collaboration?

Being a leader in the digital era

Collaborating in the digital era means working in a constantly evolving context, shaped by new technologies, complex projects, and high risks regarding budget and project outcomes. This has a fundamental impact on administrative leadership, as leaders play a key role in collaborative arrangements and successfully managing change. Interestingly, our research puts forwards different success factors for leading collaborations than what governments tend to focus on. In the context of digitalisation, governments often focus on mobilising IT/digital skills and expertise to meet this change. Our research revealed, however, that leaders should pay closer attention to the development of collaborative skills and competencies.

"[...]our research puts forwards different success factors for leading collaborations than what governments tend to focus on."

Whereas governments often focus on formal structures, processes and regulations, our research clearly underlines the role of administrative leadership for a collaborative approach towards digital transformation. TROPICO uncovered clear evidence for the high importance of leadership for intergovernmental collaboration, external collaboration with businesses, citizens, and civil society, and for e-participation. We observed a strong effect of individual leaders’ actions on collaborative innovation, as compared to formal arrangements and institutional design such as structures, rules, budgets and plans. Leadership and process-related conditions are an essential component for the success of collaborative efforts towards digital transformation.

How to successfully lead collaborations in the context of government digitalisation

Leading collaborative efforts is very demanding, as leadership constantly must deal with the discomforting, ambiguous and uncertain nature of collaboration, especially in a government context - which is strongly based on hierarchy, clear responsibilities often leading to silos and formal rules. Our findings confirm that collaboration is resource intensive and demands continuous attention and commitment from decision-makers.

In collaborations, variation of perspectives, of skills, and of knowledge are important factors stimulating learning processes and innovation. Leadership that encourages the exploration and usage of this diversity enhances the innovation process. However, variation also causes complexity and uncertainty, and leaders should be able to address this complexity and streamline the innovation process towards the desired outcome.

Research and academic literature increasingly highlight the importance of a so-called collaborative leadership to cope with these new challenges. TROPICO underlines the importance of strengthening collaborative skills among employees and especially leaders: the capacity to communicate, create shared meaning, resolve conflicts, and overcome resistance to change.

However, the changing nature and dynamics of collaboration projects and the multifaceted nature of digitalisation projects also implies that...
we cannot assume collaborative leadership as the one most effective leadership style. TROPICO found that transactional leadership also remains highly relevant within the context of managing rather large, resource intensive and complex digitalisation projects. Government organisations still predominantly work and operate in hierarchical structures which much better accommodate transactional leadership.

Therefore, leaders need to find the right balance between a transactional leadership style focusing on goals, monitoring and incentive structures to enhance the performance of employees, and a collaborative leadership style aiming at bringing new and different actors together, motivating, developing trust, and facilitating communication.

**Explore the research behind the results:**

TROPICO shed important light on the visions, goals, and underlying assumptions that governments have towards collaboration in the context of digitalisation, with an analysis of 16 digitalisation strategies from 8 European countries. The researchers also conducted 10 case studies in 5 countries, on collaboration arrangements and dynamics in the context of government online platforms and smart city approaches. An extensive document analysis, 62 interviews with experts engaged in collaborative public networks and a literature review formed the basis for this research.

Learn more in our [research report on European e-government/digitalisation strategies](#) and in our [case studies report on collaborative management for digitalisation](#). Check our [five propositions explaining the key aspects of collaborative digitalisation in our research report](#). Read our recommendations on success factors for digitalisation in the [Policy Brief on internal collaboration as a cornerstone of national digitalisation strategies](#).

**Learn about a collaborative example from our research:**

The Smart city project in Antwerp, Belgium, gathered diverse partners: the city administration, a technological research centre and an IT partner. The collaborative style of the leader was crucial to navigate imbalances in technical knowledge and the complexity stemming from a difference in perspectives about the purpose of the collaboration. Read more in our [case study](#), or in the “Leadership” section in the Antwerp Smart City Policy chapter of our [case studies report](#).

**Watch our video:**

Watch the 7 minutes [video on leadership in the digital era](#).
Recommendations

Shared Vision

Build a shared vision and manage the «relational capital»
- Encourage open and transparent communication between the partners
- Create communication and networking opportunities
- Stay connected to all relevant project stakeholders in the governance structure
- Take the time to build relationships and trust

Balance

Find a balance between flexibility and innovation, i.e., the need to explore different and new opportunities, and a focus on the desired outcome and project goals, i.e., the need to make decisions to ensure progress

Explore new opportunities
- Support differences of opinions
- Mobilise resources and time to try new things
- Encourage learning from other contexts
- Foster a learning culture where failure is accepted

Ensure progress
- Reduce complexity
- Streamline, standardise implementation and solutions
- Monitor progress

Flexibility

Adopt a leadership style that works for the context and stage of the collaboration
- When aiming at building trust, legitimacy and developing a shared understanding, adopt a collaborative style focusing on interpersonal relations and facilitating dialogue
- When expanding networks and aiming at retaining all partners in the project, adopt a collaborative style focusing on bringing actors together and motivating them
- When aiming at boosting creativity, adopt a collaborative style supporting learning and out-of-the-box thinking
- When aiming at achieving results, gaining stability, and compliance and in the phase of innovation exploitation and scaling, adopt a transactional leadership style emphasising objectives, accountability, monitoring success and pushing for more time and energy
2:

How to collaborate for public service innovation?
Processes of collaborative innovation

Governments constantly search for new ways to create innovative services. Crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic require governments to create new services, because the pre-existing services are inadequate for addressing such complex, wicked problems. Technological innovations in public services are promising because of their capacity to connect and integrate a large variety of services and contexts. However, technology is not enough by itself to answer new global problems, as governments need to bring actors together, and know how to collaborate to create innovation and produce new services.

Collaborating with a variety of stakeholders can result in creative processes and new, improved, and innovative public services, as knowledge, resources, and ideas are shared and connected with each other. TROPICO research generated evidence for the crucial role of involving external actors, both private sector organisations and users, into the collaboration process. When actors with diverse backgrounds engage in synergistic processes that stimulate mutual learning and increases the collective capacity, new innovative solutions can be developed.

"TROPICO research generated evidence for the crucial role of involving external actors, both private sector organisations and users, into the collaboration process."

Identifying which stakeholders are valuable in collaborative innovation processes is essential. Including the right mix of actors can prevent distrust and conflict, enhance creative ideation processes, and secure support for the newly created services. In addition, involving service users can be of critical importance for the collaborative innovation process, as they possess knowledge, experiences and perspectives that are relevant for the development of new services.

To create service innovation from collaborative efforts, our research identified four different processes as relevant. First, searching for actor diversity is important to allow diversification in the innovation process and create opportunities for creative ideation. When collaborating partners have different ideas, perspectives and know-how, synergies arise, and the generated ideas will be more likely to be original and inventive.

Second, new associations between distinct ideas and perspectives need to be formed through instances of transformative learning where individuals recombine ideas and build on each other's knowledge. Third, consensus building between partners helps to select desirable ideas and stimulates the convergence towards a shared solution. Fourth, building commitment towards implementing the solution ensures that the partners mobilise resources towards the implementation of the solution and collectively achieve the innovation.

In order to properly support these processes of collaborative innovation, and thereby enhance technological innovation in service delivery, TROPICO identified multiple conditions which stimulate innovation by collaborating with external actors. Furthermore, our research also identified several challenges that are related to involving external actors in innovation process.

Involvement of external actors in the collaboration process

Stimulating conditions

Our research highlighted the importance of selecting the actors with the needed knowledge, skills, drivers, and incentives, which positively impacted the collaborative innovation process. First of all, different types of expertise, including ICT expertise, technical know-how, and legal knowledge are relevant in driving the innovation process. Second, network management skills, leadership skills, project management skills, and skills to approach and connect with service users are important to stimulate the generation of innovative solutions. Third, incentives and drivers, which include drivers related to the content of the project itself (e.g. urgent need, commitment to the project), but also
for instance economic drivers, are important to understand the motives and interest of the involved actors. These motives and interest can stimulate but also harm the innovation process.

Moreover, the supporting role of higher management, elected politicians, the media and actors from the broader policy sector stimulates collaboration and innovation. Actively searching for this external support helps in creating an environment in which the innovation is widely accepted.

Furthermore, as users are one of the most important external stakeholders for collaborative innovation, users should be empowered to act in the innovation process (e.g. through co-creation or co-leadership). Also, the motives and attitudes towards users’ involvement are crucial, and user involvement is most successful when the viewpoints of the users are aligned with the viewpoints of the collaboration partners.

Challenges of involving external actors
Our research uncovered three main challenges of involving external actors in innovation processes. First, collaboration between actors from diverse backgrounds is valuable to generate innovative ideas, but it might also cause tensions and conflicts. Our analysis points out that effective network management and conflict management is important to ensure that conflicts do not escalate and endanger collaboration.

Second, because collaboration is essentially consensus-oriented, collaborative innovation processes can be slow and lengthy. The complex environment in which the innovation process is deployed, with a lot of diverse stakeholders and intensive interactions between these stakeholders, might hamper the efficiency of the innovation process. Our research therefore indicates that the management and coordination of a partnership should create value for all the partners, otherwise, partners might leave the collaboration or influence it negatively.

Third, a lack of commitment from the partners to implement the innovation could undermine collaborative innovation efforts – and result in a failed adoption of the innovation. Unwillingness to take the risk of implementing something new is a challenge, as it is easier for the partners to let other partners implement the created innovation and later adopt it when it has proven its worth.

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Explore the research behind the results:
TROPICO investigated the conditions that affect collaborative partnerships in creating innovative public service, with comparative case studies of 19 collaborative eHealth projects in five countries and an in-depth analysis. The research included a cross-case analysis of 131 interviews with project coordinators, public and private collaboration partners, and users, as well as a literature review.

Learn more in our comparative case studies report on external collaboration in eHealth partnerships and our research report on the conditions of public-private collaborations to foster innovation. Read how to enhance innovation through public-private collaboration in our Policy Brief.

Learn about a collaborative example from our research:
The Dysphagia E-learning project in Denmark shows the importance of a highly motivated project team. In this case, public actors and users were both experts in the field and shared one vision - the importance of the e-learning program and necessity to increase competencies among health professionals. This kept them motivated and contributed to the success of the project. Read more in our case study, or in the “Dysphagia E-learning” chapter of our case studies report.
Ensure the needed diversity of actors

- Before initiating the partnership, perform a mapping of potential partners, considering their skills, knowledge, incentives, and drivers, in line with the resources and capabilities needed.
- Select partners that have the skills (e.g. network management, leadership skills) and knowledge (e.g. ICT knowledge, technical expertise, legal expertise) necessary for the innovation process.
- When selecting partners, pay attention to their incentives and drivers/motivations (e.g. project-related drivers, economic drivers).

Build a shared understanding between these diverse actors

- Encourage deliberation and consensus-building during the innovation process.
- Ensure that the partners can relate to the objectives, and that their interests are aligned with them.
- Commit the partners to work towards the implementation of the innovation, for instance by using contracts.
- When involving users, aim to align the viewpoints of the users and partners.

Explore new ideas and knowledge

- Encourage transformative learning, where individual participants recombine ideas and build on each other’s knowledge; stimulating creativity, innovation, experimentation, and the exploration/exploitation of new knowledge.
- Involve knowledgeable users intensively. Grant them real power vs. just being informed. Try to eliminate any barriers for active involvement, e.g., remove rules and procedures that hinder collaboration, ensure reliable information, avoid unbalanced representation.

Actively seek and secure internal and external support

- Get a clear mandate as organisational representative in the partnership from the higher management of the collaboration partners.
- Establish support from service organisations in the broader policy sector by communicating ideas and achievements, for instance through workshops.
- Ensure interest and support from the relevant, leading elected politicians by investing time and effort in bilateral conversations with political leaders.
- Seek media support, especially in cases where the innovation is meant to be used by a large part of the population.
3:

How to involve citizens?
Participatory process in policy design

The transformation towards greater collaboration and the turn from governments for the people towards governments by the people is linked with technological innovations. Our research demonstrates that governments can improve the engagement of citizens through ICT. Tools such as e-platforms can open and improve the interaction between citizens and governments, as they can help overcome traditional practical barriers to communication, such as distance and time.

Opening up public sector organisations to external stakeholders – citizens, other governmental agencies, private and voluntary organisations – enables decision-makers to take advantage of available external knowledge and involve novel solutions to public policy challenges. Greater citizen engagement has a potential of not only better informing government decision-making but also enhancing democratic processes through contributing to the values of openness, innovation, and collaboration in governance.

"[...]one of our main research findings is that the term “citizen participation” seems to be handled in a rather abstract way by governments."

Participation can ensure that citizens’ viewpoints, ideas, and recommendations are incorporated into the decision-making process and implemented in the resulting public policies or services. Higher levels of participation are likely to increase trust, accountability, and ultimately higher degrees of citizens’ acceptance for the final public policy or service.

Surprisingly, one of our main research findings is that the term “citizen participation” seems to be handled in a rather abstract way by governments. Many initiatives just aim at “participation” - without defining or explaining what kind of participation is to be expected.

The ideal is that citizens should become genuine designers and not only consumers of policies. TROPICO has identified success factors that can help design platforms for e-participation to raise the quality of citizen involvement.

Challenges of citizen participation

Digital democracy is fraught with similar pitfalls as the traditional democratic discourse. Traditional problems such as low participation rates, the lack of diversity of actors or underrepresentation do not automatically disappear when the democratic process shifts to an online format. Our research showed that due to barriers in the institutional framework and participatory processes, online citizen engagement initiatives may end up struggling with low demand and acceptance.

Our research also revealed that structures and processes designed to ensure feedback from government are often lacking. Feedback is particularly important when trying to create a climate of inclusion, transparency, trust, and creative interaction in the government-citizen relationship. Citizens are stimulated in taking part in collaboration arrangements when they see that their effort is recognised and taken into account.

Managing collaborative dynamics within participatory processes can be challenging, as formal regulations may generate some constraints but are crucial for determining the conditions for citizen engagement. This is particularly important for the “weaker side” of the collaborative arrangement, i.e. for citizens who are not in the formal power position within the collaboration. Establishing rules for the right of participation and safeguards for the participants contributes to the transparency which, in turn, increases the legitimacy of the participatory process.

Formal institutionalisation also enables to systematically address issues of participation, such as privacy, accuracy, property, and ownership of information, as well as access to technology and information.

Our research found that although e-participation platforms have on some occasions increased the
number of citizens engaged in the policy-making processes, the quality of participation, i.e. the degree of shared decision-making with citizens, has often remained on a rather modest level. The goals of the participatory processes and the level of participation are often not explicitly outlined within the objectives of citizen engagement initiatives. A consequence of this generic approach to “participation” is that the participation level likely remains modest and oriented more towards informing or consulting, and less towards involvement, collaboration, or empowerment of the citizens.

Explore the research behind the results:
TROPICO explored the influence of e-participation initiatives on policy design and collaboration with citizens. The researchers carried out empirical analysis of recent e-participation platforms in 7 European countries, followed by a comparative analysis of these case studies.

Learn more in our comparative case studies report on e-participation, which includes descriptions of the individual cases, and in our research report on organising e-participation, which investigates the functioning of these e-participation platforms. Find our recommendations in the Policy Brief on success factors for e-participation. Read our article on organising e-participation.

Learn about a collaborative example from our research:
The e-participation platform Decide Madrid, in Spain, allows citizens, associations, NGOs and companies to be involved in the policy cycle in Madrid municipality. It offers a high level of citizen engagement. Read more in our case study or in our article offering a critical analysis of Decide Madrid.

Watch our video:
Watch the 7 minutes video on involving citizens.

Read our book:
TROPICO researchers Tiina Randma-Liiv and Veiko Lember are publishing a book on Engaging citizens in policy-making in February 2022.

Where can I find out more?

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Recommendations

**Feedback**

Encourage open and transparent two-way communication between government and citizens

- Make sure that structures and processes are designed to ensure proper feedback from government
- Give feedback on the impact of citizens' contributions, communicate the result of the public engagement, the progress or cancellation of their proposals
- Use ICT tools to open a dialogue and provide feedback, especially when reaching large groups of citizens

**Transparency**

Formalise the participatory process to ensure transparency

- Determine the conditions for citizen engagement, including access to technology and information, the right to participate, and safeguards for participants
- Handle citizen participation and input in a standardised way rather than relying on the enthusiasm of single organisations, units, or individuals
- Monitor collaborative arrangements systematically to enable learning and development

**Support**

Ensure the necessary support for the purpose, promotion, and sustainability of the platform

- Make an estimate of expenditures necessary for the effective functioning of the platform
- Ensure the workforce has the capacity to implement the platform
- Monitor and examine the platform on a systematic and regular basis
- Collect performance information on the actual functioning of the platform
- Share success stories and promote the platform across various groups of citizens

**Inclusion**

Engage disengaged societal groups

- Consider the diversity of actors when proposing topics for citizen engagement
- Have a detailed, professional communication strategy to generate citizens' support
- Use ICT tools to overcome practical barriers to communication
- Select relevant communication channels to reach different groups of citizens

**Empowerment**

Use the engagement process not only to inform or consult citizens, target collaboration and empowerment

- Ensure that organisational and process design as well as technical solutions support the achievement of higher participation levels, and that citizens' viewpoints are incorporated
- Choose ICT solutions supporting collaborative interaction with citizens
How to assess collaboration?
Assessment challenges

The last few decades have seen an increasing political and social demand on the regular and systematic assessment of public policy, not least their efficiency and legitimacy. This pressure comes from many sides, such as the New Public Management focus on output measurement, advocates of evidence-based policymaking seeking certainty about 'what works', and the increasing availability of ICT systems allowing instant and comprehensive reporting on policy results.

Collaboration around policy design and service delivery together with new ICT tools has had a fundamental impact on accountability and efficiency. But all collaborations are not the same and their characteristics will determine outcomes. While the delivery of efficiency is crucial given funding pressures (post-austerity and now post-pandemic) and legitimacy is essential for ensuring durable support for policy solutions and services, it is difficult to assess the efficiency and the legitimacy of collaborative governance because of their dynamic and often informal character.

The dynamic character of collaboration implies that the goals of design and service delivery are frequently altered because of many new inputs not only from policy-makers, but also other stakeholders. Such changes often make it difficult to assess goal effectiveness and efficiency. The informal character implies that it is difficult to ascertain who should provide an account to who, what these accounts should look like, and what kind of reactions or sanctions they should entail.

Finally, collaborative governance should, ideally, allow citizens to partake in service delivery, cater better to their needs, boost outcomes and, thereby, enhance legitimacy and efficiency. Our research showed that this is indeed possible, but it hinges on several preconditions.

How to handle accountability

Somewhat paradoxically, accountability is both a precondition for making many types of assessment, such as managerial performance, but an overzealous and narrow-minded quest for accountability may also undermine the processes and results of collaboration.

How to assess efficiency

Despite the increasing demands on the assessment of public policy, the evidence base on the impact of collaborations on efficiency remains partial as policies are complex and output/outcomes unfold at different times, often with no evaluation taking place.
Even though one of the main reasons to start a collaboration is to generate efficiencies, our research produced a mixed and inconclusive body of evidence of impacts. Therefore, there is the need to understand the wider picture, starting from the circumstances in which the collaborations take place, the features of collaborations (innovativeness, involvement of ICT, etc.), their main aims, policies and services involved.

We found a general need for developing a culture of defining and measuring concepts. Red tape and efficiency, for example, are often perceived as interchangeable or overlapping terms (e.g., reduced use of paper, the burdensome exchange of written communication). There is also a lack of quantitative and qualitative studies that relate ICT in collaborations to efficiency. Insufficient attention is paid to the identification of costs (e.g., upfront, transaction, maintenance costs) and measures of efficiency (inputs and outputs). Often, set-up and maintenance costs are more clearly measured than wider efficiency outcomes. As a result, it is difficult to know whether the costs outweigh the benefits.

It is important to improve understanding on the differential impact of collaboration (e.g., size, type of service, ownership, funding, complexity, etc.) as there are opportunities to exploit economies of scale in small sized organisations and in services which rely less on service user preferences and where there is lower complexity in service planning and delivery. The governance structure of collaborative governance arrangements is also relevant, as fragmentation of ownership or management can lead to inefficiencies.

Explore the research behind the results:
TROPICO conducted comparative case studies on collaboration’s effects for accountability in 5 European countries and a quantitative assessment of organisational efficiency in a collaborative practice. The researchers have also conducted interviews of ‘best practices’ examples of collaborations across Europe which exploit ICT and analysed data from existing surveys and measures of red tape and efficiency. The research was completed by literature reviews on legitimacy and accountability in the context of collaborative governance and on efficiency and red tape in collaborations.

Learn more on the TROPICO research on accountability with our case studies report on collaboration’s effects for accountability in long-term unemployment collaborations, and read the challenges and lessons learned in the comparative case studies research report. Learn more about the TROPICO research on efficiency with our research report on efficiency and red tape.

Learn about a collaborative example from our research:
In the ‘Fair Start Scotland’ support programme in the Forth Valley, United Kingdom, three councils worked in collaboration using a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), but each organisation had the freedom to manage their clients (the long-term unemployed) and customise the ‘user journey’ to meet each client’s specific needs. The collaboration gained input legitimacy (responsiveness) by involving the client directly affected; output legitimacy (effectiveness) was measured by the number of long-term unemployed helped by the programme. Read more in our case study description and in the “Fair Start Scotland” chapter of our case study report.

Where can I find out more?

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Assess your collaboration:
Use the Collaboration Monitor, a free online self-assessment tool designed for practitioners engaged in collaborative arrangements, to gauge your performance in legitimacy and efficiency.
**Recommendations**

**Awareness**

Be aware of the trade-off between accountability and legitimacy

- Be aware that more accountability does not necessarily make collaborations more legitimate, often the reverse is the case. This is important for both politicians and public managers.
- Carefully consider what types of accounts you want to receive and reflect on whether such accounts are really making the services more acceptable in the eyes of care deliverers, citizens, and other relevant stakeholders.

**Balance**

Balance the need for standardisation with the complex situation that you are assessing

- Involve public managers and caseworkers in the design and continued modification of ICT systems.
- Design and select indicators with great care.
- Interpret results cautiously in dialogue with employees delivering the services and, if possible, with the citizens using the services.

**Sharing**

Improve data sharing between partners in order to enhance accountability

- Discuss how best to meet and balance legal concerns over privacy, managerial concerns over effective account-giving, and social concerns over the ability to produce useful and effective services for and with citizens.

**Feedback**

Take feedback seriously to ensure legitimacy

- Organise meetings between politicians and senior public managers and representatives of caseworkers, to discuss and provide feedback.

**Measure**

Identify how to define and measure efficiency

- Categorise different types of costs and efficiency outcomes at the start of the collaboration and compare this to previous performance to assess whether efficiencies are achieved, making sure to compare alike situations (e.g., in terms of costs accounting).
- Consider non-cost efficiencies including service improvement, access to a greater range of expertise, and creation of innovative and sustainable service delivery, in determining the ‘value’ derived from collaboration.

**Impact**

Improve understanding on the differential impact of collaboration on efficiency

- Consider the different context, sizes of organisations involved, and ways of organising collaborations (e.g., intermunicipal cooperation, shared services, etc.) to improve outcomes.
Thank you!

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